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ABSTRACT

Across the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's five-state region, state departments of education and state legislators are working to strengthen reading programs, raise student reading achievement, and help struggling readers. People now realize that reading proficiency is the key to high student achievement. This report summarizes the initiatives and legislation in place or under consideration in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Arkansas has developed the "Smart Start" initiative for Grades K-4, an initiative which aims to increase reading and math achievement at the lower grades to create a strong foundation for academic success. At every elementary school, Louisiana legislated the implementation of a reading program designed to teach students to read on grade level by no later than third grade. New Mexico has put much effort into establishing standards and benchmarks for all grade levels in all subject areas and has received an "A" from "Education Week" for its efforts. Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act took effect on July 1, 1998. The act aims to ensure that each child attains the necessary reading skills by completion of third grade. In Texas, the Texas Reading Initiative consists of several components: increasing teachers' knowledge of their students' reading skills in K-3 through assessment; providing research-based information to educators through two documents, "Good Practice" and "Beginning Reading Instruction"; professional development; and parent involvement. (NKA)

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Reading across the Region

By Leslie Blair

Topics in Early Reading Coherence

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

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Topics in Early Reading Coherence

Reading Across the Region

Reading proficiency is the key to high student achievement and the earlier we help struggling readers, the sooner they can attain academic success.

Across SEDL's five-state region, state departments of education and state legislators are working to strengthen reading programs, raise student reading achievement, and help struggling readers. The focus on reading during this legislative session is probably due to a combination of factors including the systemic reform movement that has been afoot for nearly a decade, reading research that has been much publicized in the past year, and the current national political climate with its emphasis on education issues and the passage of the Reading Excellence Act. We have come to realize that reading proficiency is the key to high student achievement and the earlier we help struggling readers, the sooner they can attain academic success.

The region appears to be moving in the right direction, but we have a long way to go. Any concentrated attention to reading probably won't result immediately in changes in reading achievement. Efforts to ensure that all children learn to read are long term by nature--it takes time to fully develop the research-based reading programs that the states require or consider. Improving reading achievement will also require ongoing, multi-faceted, and effective professional development-an effort that is often just given lip service, with only minimal resources to support it.

Here is a summary of initiatives and legislation in place or under consideration in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Arkansas

In May, 1998, when Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee announced the state's Smart Start initiative for grades K-4, he said, "It's not so much a 'bold, innovative program'--those come and go all the time--as it is a commitment to the commonsense principles we know

work." Smart Start aims to increase reading and math achievement at the lower grades to create a strong foundation for academic success.

The initiative includes increased teacher training, training for principals, student assessment, and holding school districts accountable for student achievement. Smart Start incorporates the curriculum framework developed by the Arkansas Department of Education, and the staff development emphasizes topics related to subject matter content, curriculum alignment with the frameworks, analysis of assessment results, and incorporation of a variety of instructional techniques.

Although Smart Start won't be fully in place until the 1999-2000 school year, professional development training is already underway this year. Teachers and administrators across the state have been receiving training in the use of a balanced literacy approach through the state's Early Literacy Learning in Arkansas (ELLA) for grades K-2, Effective Literacy for Grades 2-4, and Multicultural Reading and Thinking (McRAT) for grades 4-8. This balanced approach recognizes the importance of phonics, word recognition practice, and focused comprehension instruction and attempts to provide the child with both the skills and motivation to become a proficient reader.

For the 1999-2000 school year, five additional reading specialists in Reading/Early Childhood Curriculum will be assigned to the Education Service Cooperatives and three specialists who are now part-time will be increased to full time.

Louisiana students' performance on the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) prompted the 1997 state legislature to appropriate $30 million for a K-3 reading and math initiative. The legislation required each "governing authority" to implement at every elementary school a reading program designed to teach students to read on grade level by not later than third grade. The mandate specified that the reading programs should include, but not be limited to, phonics. It also had an accountability component within the first 30 school days of the school year and the last 30 school days of the school year, teachers must report the number of students who are not reading on grade level. At the time, however, the legislature did not indicate that a specific reading assessment be used.

The 1998 legislature appropriated another $20 million for the initiative. Then, in May, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) selected the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) as the assessment to be used to measure the reading level of each child. By summer, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) worked to get staff development for the DRA in place so teachers could begin using the assessment at the start of school. DRA consultants made presentations at each of Louisiana's eight regional education service centers. To help build capacity, LDE invited districts to send one teacher for each 30 first- and second-grade teachers in the district. These teachers, in turn, were able to take what they learned back to their peers.

The BESE also recently relaxed the "minimum minutes per subject per week" policies to allow some flexibility in the amount of time spent on reading instruction. The board requires that 825 minutes per week be spent on language arts for grades 1-8. Because of the importance of reading, elementary school teachers are able to spend up to 1,050 minutes a week with students who need additional instruction.

Since the training last summer, LDE program manager Avril Font says she and two other staff members have spent a great deal of time going to districts, talking about the assessment, and explaining its purpose. Font notes that many districts are providing extensive professional development for the DRA in addition to that offered by the state. LDE has also prepared a DRA training video that will be sent to each school in the state that has a first-, second-, or third-grade class.

At first many teachers voiced a great deal of concern about the DRA, but the concerns are dwindling as they find out how valuable the assessment is.

"Most teachers are telling us the reading assessment is the most valuable time they spend with their young students. It helps them develop effective instruction and then identifies each student's reading progress. For teachers, there is no greater reward than the knowledge that they are making a difference for their students," says BESE president Glenny Lee Buquet.

New Mexico has put much effort into establishing standards and benchmarks for all grade levels in all subject areas-so much so that Education Week recently gave the state an A for its efforts in doing so in its annual "Quality Counts" report on the states. Now the bipartisan push is for accountability, teacher standards, and lowering New Mexico's high dropout rate. Both second-term governor Gary Johnson and Senate president pro tempore Manny Aragon have said education is their priority during the 1999 legislative session. Johnson favors ending social promotion and testing annually at every grade level. He is also a strong proponent of vouchers.

Numerous education bills have been introduced this session; several feature appropriations for reading programs. One bill provides for training and support services for reading recovery programs; another provides money for professional development related to early literacy for teachers in Torrance and Santa Fe counties. Another sweeping bill establishes certification requirements for teachers, requires the teaching of phonics in grades 1-3, and requires students to read on level by third grade with better than 95 percent accuracy. One memorial would require the New Mexico State Department of Education (NMSDE) to encourage phonics instruction; another requests NMSDE study early intervention reading techniques and recommend its findings to the legislature prior to the next legislative session.

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As SEDLetter went to press, the State Board of Education favors a combination bill for early childhood education and early literacy that could provide as much as $15 million for early literacy programs that would affect preschoolers and students in K-2. The money would be distributed to all 89 school districts in New Mexico, taking into account the district's literacy rate and the at-risk population served by each district. The legislation has a parent involvement component and provides for teacher training and before and after school literacy programs. It would also give districts the option of expanding kindergarten programs from a half day to a full day.

New Mexico has the Even Start Family Literacy Program in place. Nine school districts currently receive funding for the program at 18 sites. This program is carried out in collaboration with area community colleges and serves young children and their parents. Parents are able to improve their own literacy skills and learn how to work with their children in literacy-rich activities from infancy.

Although there is not currently a professional development program for reading instruction in place, NMSDE is trying to educate teachers regarding reading research. In March, the department is sponsoring a presentation by well-known reading researchers G. Reid Lyon and Louisa C. Moats at the University of New Mexico and are sponsoring a conference strand, "A Multicultural Approach to Literacy in the Primary Grades," at the annual conference of the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children. Lyons and Moats will also speak during the conference strand.

Ann Trujillo, state director for the Even Start program is hopeful that this legislative session will be fruitful. "Those of us in early childhood education have been saying early literacy is important for years," she says.

Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act took effect July 1, 1998. This act aims to ensure that each child attains the necessary reading skills by completion of third grade. State representative Betty Boyd, one of the bill's sponsors, describes the act as a way to "front-load" with the younger students. She says, "It distresses me that we have so many students graduating from high school with reading problems." By focusing on the younger students, Boyd and other lawmakers hope teachers and parents can catch reading problems early on and that students will be good readers well before high school.

Jan Shafer, director of the Oklahoma State Department of Education's Reading/Literacy division, stresses that the RSA gives districts a framework that focuses on five components of reading instruction--phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency, and comprehension. The state will issue a reading report card annually for each school.

Under the act, kindergarten, first-, second-, and third-grade students are to be assessed for reading proficiency using multiple, ongoing assessments. School administrators and teachers decide which assessments to use. If a child is not reading at grade level, a

special school reading committee must prepare a reading plan that includes a program of instruction designed to bring the student up to grade level. It should include additional in-school instruction as well as tutorial instruction outside of regular school hours, and the parents are to be involved in the development of the plan. The state will provide up to $150 per first-, second-, or third-grade student for reading assessment and remediation activities.

The professional development component of the RSA, Literacy First, addresses teachers' attitudes and skills in reading assessment and classroom instruction. It has been funded through the end of 1999 and to date more than 4,000 teachers have received training. The five-day training is offered at no cost to the school districts and also includes substitute-teacher pay.

Representative Boyd believes the professional development aspect of the act is critical. She emphasizes that the intention of the act and the associated professional development was not to "point the finger" at teachers and imply that they were doing a bad job teaching reading. "We were saying, 'Let's find something new and exciting' they can take back to the classroom," she reports.

Oklahoma legislators have introduced several bills related to reading this session, including a bill related to teacher competencies that requires preservice teachers to receive training that focuses on the five essential elements of reading instruction. Another bill, which did not pass, mandated districts to retain any K-3 student not reading on grade level by the end of the school year. Accountability is also an issue this legislative session.

In January 1996, when Governor George W. Bush challenged Texans to focus on the most basic of education goals-that every child must learn to read by third grade-nearly one-fourth of third-grade students did not pass the reading portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Three years later, Texas is well on its way to meeting Bush's challenge: the 1998 TAAS scores reflect that only 14 percent of third-graders who took the test did not pass the reading portion.

Commissioner of Education Mike Moses and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) helped school districts step up to Bush's 1996 challenge with the Texas Reading Initiative. Assistant Commissioner Robin Gilchrist remembers Moses asking, "What is the most fundamental thing we can do?"

The answer was to provide good information and resources to schools and districts and allow them to make decisions about their reading programs. Like Oklahoma, Texas is providing structure for reading programs, but allowing local districts and schools to make the decisions regarding assessment, instruction, and remediation.

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At the heart of the Texas Reading Initiative are several components:

- increasing teachers' knowledge of their students' reading skills in K-3 through assessment;
- providing research-based information to educators through two documents,
    - *Good Practice: Implications for Reading Instruction* and
    - *Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program;*
- professional development; and
- parent involvement.

Before the initiative was established, the state legislature had already begun the movement to increase early reading assessment. In 1996, the 75th Legislature mandated that by the 1998-99 school year K-2 students should be administered an early reading skills and comprehension assessment. TEA staff enlisted the help of university researchers to review 141 assessment tools. In May 1998, TEA released a list of 11 suitable early reading assessment instruments, including the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), a criterion-referenced test for grades K-2 that the agency developed in collaboration with the Center for Academic Reading Skills at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

The TPRI assesses different skills according to grade level. For example, the kindergarten level evaluates listening comprehension, book and print awareness, phonemic awareness, and graphophonemic knowledge. The second-grade level measures reading comprehension and graphophonemic knowledge, word reading ability, and accuracy. Although teachers and schools may use any assessment tool, state monies may be used only for the 11 tools listed. According to Gilchrist, TEA estimates that about 80 percent of the schools are using the TPRI.

Although no professional development is mandated under the initiative, TEA has teamed with the Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts at The University of Texas at Austin and the 20 Texas regional education service centers to provide professional development materials and training. The training materials cover a broad range of reading-related topics including early literacy in Spanish, word analysis, phonological awareness, and reading fluency. The training guides include overheads, handouts, and activities for staff developers to use in instructing teachers. Additionally, at each of the 20 regional educational service centers in the state, a reading liaison provides information and training to teachers. TEA has also identified 13 "spotlight reading schools" across the state to showcase good reading practices. The spotlight schools provide teachers with sample reading activities.

Another component in the Texas Reading Initiative is the Texas Reading Academies Grant Program. In August 1998, 37 grants, ranging in size from $72,036 to $547,871,were awarded through the program to 31 school districts and one regional service center. Approximately 25 more grants will be awarded this spring. The one-year grants fund projects that focus on the prevention of reading failure and intervention activities. Applicants are encouraged to develop "academy-type" reading laboratories for students

and to create reading programs based on research.

Recently Texas "raised the bar" for reading. This spring, more students than ever will take the TAAS tests, as it is now more difficult for districts to exclude special education students from testing. Also in 1999, districts will be accountable for students taking the TAAS in Spanish. Under pending legislation (the bill was passed by the Senate unanimously in February), third graders who do not pass the reading portion of the TAAS test would be retained. However, the legislation, which is now being considered by the House, contains a provision for multiple opportunities to pass the TAAS and for accelerated, research-based instruction for students reading below level. If passed, it will also provide for parents of kindergarten and first- and second-grade students to be notified if their child is below grade level in reading development or comprehension.

-- by Leslie Blair

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